DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 254 078 FL 014 863

AUTHOR Giauque, Gerald S.
TITLE Socrates in the First Year Foreign Language Classroom--or--When Are "Why" Questions Appropriate?
PUB DATE [85]
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; *Classroom Techniques; *Inquiry; *Introductory Courses; Logical Thinking; *Second Language Instruction; *Teacher Role; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Socratic Method

ABSTRACT

It is suggested that the foreign language teacher's role is not to answer questions about the logic of the language but to persuade students to use it. A response of a friendly "Because!," without apology, and sometimes with a comment about the occasional lack of logic or consistency in English grammar or constructions, is recommended. It is noted that the central issue of language learning is not understanding the "logic" of the language but accepting and producing the language, and that students can be guided into asking more useful questions about techniques for retaining information. When the students are more skillful, the teacher can ask "why" questions, with the result that the students will either realize how unproductive the questions are or produce very good answers. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED254078

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Socrates in the First Year Foreign Language Classroom -- or -- When are "why" Questions Appropriate?

Gerald S. Giauque

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Gerald S. Giauque

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

For the first seven or eight years of my teaching career, one of the biggest problems I encountered in the foreign language classroom occurred when a student would ask: "Why does French use the article when English does not?" or "Why is there an imperfect tense in Spanish?" or "Why aren't other languages LOGICAL, like English?" Being a conscientious and humanitarian (albeit naive) professor, respectful of my students, I felt that since the students asked these questions, I was duty-bound to answer them. But the problem for me was that in 90% of the cases, I did not know the answers to these questions. This is not to say that I did not speak well the foreign language. I was teaching; perhaps, indeed, the problem was that I spoke it too well and simply had never questioned many items which were problematic for the students. Or to say it another way, the problem was not in knowing the correct form in the target language. Rather, the problem lay in a combination of three attitudes: (1) the attitude of the student who felt that he, as a student, had the right to question the logic (or try to discover the logic) of a given expression in the target language, in an effort to compare that expression with some similar expression in his native language; (2) my own attitude that I, as professor, was supposed to know the answer to every question; and (3), the attitude of the general public, that (a) there is an answer to every question and (b), that "why" questions are appropriate in ALL classes and (c) that it is the role of the student to ask questions and the role of the professor to lecture and answer questions.

FL014863

As a result, whenever a student asked a "why" question, in the great majority of cases, I hummed and hawed around, gave an intellectually unsatisfying answer to the student, told the class that I would study up on the point under discussion,...and watched in dismay as the students' respect for me as a professor dwindled with each new "why" question. In addition, I noted that those "why" questions seemed to detract the students' attention from learning the language.

Perhaps I had been asleep during my own student days, for I never remembered that neither I nor any other student had ever asked a "why" question in a foreign language class. Oh yes, a few "why" questions were asked in the foreign literature classes, but this rarely occurred. In fact, I began to wonder if I and my generation simply did not have any questions as we were going through school, but simply had accepted without questioning (and probably without thinking) what our professors had presented in their lectures. In any case, I had no models to whom I might hearken back, and often left my classes with feelings of animosity toward my students because they were different than I had been as a student.

During those first seven years referred to at the beginning of this paper, I had occasion to participate in some singing groups outside of the university context. I remember that I had just spent a particularly frustrating day with students who continued to pose "why" questions, and then I had gone to the singing rehearsal. During the rehearsal, I noted that no one ever asked "Why do we sing it this way and not that way?" or "Why isn't this piece of music more 'logical?'" And suddenly I understood. I had been trying to teach foreign languages as if they were a science, instead of one of the "arts" (in the Arts and Science curriculum). I had been allowing students to use the scientific method, instead of teaching them, not a "non-scientific

method," but a method appropriate for skill building, rather than for fact-finding. The reason no one asked "why" questions about the music we were rehearsing was because any difficulties one might have had with it were difficulties of skill, not of understanding. The musical selection was "the way it was," and no member of the choir could say to the director, "Why doesn't the third note go up instead of down?" I suppose it might have been possible for someone to say "Why do we have to sing this?" but that "why" question requires more than a simply LOGICAL answer...it requires a persuasive one (and the problem of providing persuasive answers to rebellious "why" questions might be the subject of another essay).

The following autumn, I resolved that the way I would handle "why" questions in my classes would be to avoid trying to give a "logical" or "scientific" answer to any such questions, and to give what might appear to some to be a very "unprofessional" response. To any "why" question ("Why does French use an article where English does not?"), I would simply respond: "Because!" "Because that's the way French is! Why? Well, why not?"

The first time I used this approach, I was most pleasantly surprised. I had had fears of an open rebellion, of students totally rejecting this answer. I must admit that I responded to the "why" question with a rather forceful "Because!" and perhaps this is the reason that the students were taken a little aback, blinked twice, and accepted the point under discussion without further ado. A little later, another "why" question came up, and I again responded with "Because!" I also added, "That's the way things are! It's always been that way in French and it always will be!"

I was amazed. After a few days, the "why" questions stopped. If a student occasionally started to pose one, his peers would shout him down with "Because!" I realize that this may be offensive to students (and professors)

who favor the use of a humanistic-psychological approach to foreign language learning. It seems that an emphatically pronounced "Because!" would not only stifle the students' curiosity but possibly even injure his ego to the extent that he might drop the class. I would hasten to add, then, that I always pronounced my emphatic "Because!" with a broad grin, and/or a shrug of the shoulders. I would never apologize for my lack of ability to give an "explanation," but rather, I would briefly mention difficulties or apparent inconsistencies in the English language, such as the following:

> If you say "I don't," "we don't," "you don't," and "they don't," why don't you say "he don't?"
>
> Why has English dropped the pronoun "whom" in favor of "who?"
>
> Why is it that the second person singular pronoun "you" appears as both the subject and the direct object, while the third person has "she" and "he" and "her" and "him" for the subject and direct object, respectively?
>
> Why is the expression "I put" used for both the present tense and the past tense?
>
> Why is the conjugated form of the simple past tense of most regular verbs in English exactly like the past participle, which is not the conjugated form, of that verb?

Now most of us could probably come up with an explanation to all of these questions, IF we wanted to emphasize the "logical coherency" of English, IF we had a cooperative audience, IF the audience all spoke English natively, and IF they were acquainted with the vocabulary of grammatical terminology. But in a foreign language classroom, these conditions are hardly ever fulfilled. In addition, it truly is debatable if providing an explanation to such questions really is the best thing to do in a foreign language classroom setting. Is it not true, that our principal goal should be, not to teach grammar for the sake of teaching grammar, but of the form in question? The answer, it seems to me,

is a resounding and unequivocal "exactly!" The problem, then, is not one of understanding or comprehending the form, but merely of accepting it, and accepting it even though the person being asked to accept it finds it "illogical and strange" -- even "something to which he is not accustomed." And this is why, it seems to me, musicians spend fairly long periods of time playing or singing arppegios: To form habits that will permit them to use their musical instrument without stopping and cogitating at every note.

I do not wish to suggest that the student is not allowed to think or to ask questions. But I do think we ought to guide our students to ask questions such as "How is the best way I can remember this form?" or "How can I tie this in with what I already know?" These questions keep us on the track of language learning, and make it possible to avoid the potential adversary relationship inherent in many "why" questions students pose. Students can be reminded to use this approach by our continuing to answer all "why" questions with an emphatic "Because!"

After the student begins to acquire the forms they are supposed to acquire, the teacher may go on to new forms, using the techniques outlined above, right? Yes, but in addition, he can inject a new element into his teaching which will help change the attitude of the students immensely. He, the teacher, can begin to ask "why" questions!

Socrates, whose method is still revered, was basically not a lecturer nor an answerer of questions. Rather, he was an asker of questions. His method, although dependant upon rigorous logic, was entirely different from that generally associated with American university education today, which so emphasizes the "scientific method." Socrates understood that the student learns as much, if not more, if HE, the student, is required to provide answers to questions, rather than if the professor provides the answers. And

Socrates used his method, not to discover "facts," as much as to help the student learn things of humanistic concern (i.e., what is traditionally associated with the arts).

When the foreign language professor begins to ask "why" questions, the students who have heard him respond "Because!" to their "why" questions will answer him, "Because!" Socrates knew that his students knew the answers to his "why" questions, or else he would begin his questionning at a sufficiently elementary level that the student could respond. This technique should be used in the foreign language classroom. I don't ask "why" questions of my students until I feel fairly sure that they have grasped the material under discussion...? No...until I feel sure they can USE that material. This may not occur for 5 or 6 days or more after we initially discussed it. Then, if the students answer my "why" question with "Because," I often say, "That's not a good enough answer anymore." I will prod them, trying to get them to come up with an answer that is "logical." Usually they cannot, but when this happens, they begin to realize how inappropriate and unproductive a "why" question often is. On the other hand, sometimes the students do provide answers, and sometimes these answers are so good that I write them down after class for my own benefit!

I need to mention at this point that I try to conduct all my classes in the target language. This means that rather than "why" and "because," the expressions "pourquoi?" and "parce que" may be used a great deal in class. The students learn them very early in the year, and are able to use them as a springboard for discussion of a great variety of subjects as their vocabulary increases.

There is a hierarchy of things to be learned. A foreign language is not the most important thing in the world to learn. But things can be learned in

a foreign language class which one might never expect to learn there. In addition to the foreign language itself, which, it goes without saying, should be taught, learned and USED in the foreign language classroom, one might learn new methods of learning (i.e., a "non-scientific" method) which emphasizes right-cerebral, rather than left-cerebral, activity. One might learn a collegial method of intellectual inquiry, in which the student and the professor take on non-traditional roles, which ultimately, one would suppose, break down the vertical structures of the student-teacher relationship and replace it with a more horizontal one; nothing is more humanistic. And why should this be done?...oh...just because!